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ABSTRACT

This discussion of attrition in foreign language instruction in high schools focuses on two questions: How many students drop out? and Why do they drop out? In the first part, the 1970 figures for enrollments in foreign languages in public secondary schools are examined. The overall decline of -1.5% reflects a decrease in Course I enrollments but an increase in enrollments for Courses II-VI; this is interpreted in light of changing requirements. In the second part, the author provides an explanation of the dropout rate based on recent attrition studies. These point to several causes of foreign language attrition: (1) loss of interest, (2) requirements completed, (3) poor grades, (4) next level too hard, (5) scheduling difficulties, and (6) boring, irrelevant classes. (Author/RL)

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ATTRITION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

Cheryl Dernorsek

A discussion of attrition in foreign language instruction focuses on two questions: How many students drop out? Why do they drop out? Attrition figures computed from public secondary schools enrollment data provide the answer to the first question. Attrition studies, usually much less national in scope than enrollment surveys, attempt to answer the second question by identifying some of the reasons which lead to student's decisions to drop out. Inevitably the answers to the second question are less clear-cut than the answers to the first. This report is in two parts to correspond to the two questions.

I

Although the MLA has not publicly issued enrollment figures from its 1970 Public Secondary School Survey, data are available from worksheets in the MLA office. Portions of the data are reproduced here in tables in so far as they contribute to an assessment of attrition trends.

A comparison of the total enrollments in 1968 and 1970 for grades 7-12 in French, Spanish, and German shows a slight drop in 1970 from the 1968 total, a percentage change of -1.5% (see Tables 1, 2A, 2B, and 2C).[1] The percent of change in public secondary school enrollment for the same period was +4.9%. Although total enrollment for French and German fell by 7.3% and 2.9% respectively from their 1968 levels, a 3.4% rise in Spanish enrollment minimized the overall decline. These increases and decreases were evenly spread across the United States, with the greatest increases recorded in New England, the Mideast, and the Rocky Mountains and the greatest decreases in the Southeast, Plains, and Far West.

Enrollment in Course I (i.e., the first course: French I, Spanish I, and German I) in 1970 suffered a greater decline from 1968 figures than did the total enrollment, which may reflect the effects of the general loosening of the high school graduation requirement or the college entrance requirement. A student enrolled in a foreign language before a change in the requirement may elect a second or third year to complete the sequence or for any other reason, but a student who is about to enroll in the first course may interpret the cancellation of the requirement as a vote of no confidence in foreign languages and withdraw from Course I. Total Course I enrollment fell by 2.0%. Again French and German fell 6.8% and 3.2% respectively while Spanish Course I enrollment rose by 1.8%. Total enrollment in 1970 fell proportionately less than Course I enrollment because course enrollments beyond Course I were slightly higher than in 1968. Spanish enrollment in Courses II, III, IV, V, VI were largely responsible for this upper course increase since Spanish enrollment in this division rose by nearly 6.0% (see Table 3). Course II-VI for French, Spanish, and German experienced an overall increase of 1.0%.

The 1970 figures show that the percent of Course I students in all three languages who elected Course II remained about the same as in 1968, 47.6%, a decrease of 0.9% from the 1968 figures. In spite of the general rise in Spanish enrollment (3.4%), its rate for continuing students was (45.7%) the lowest of the three languages. German with 52.6% continuity, has the highest rate of the three; the rate for French was 48.9%.

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Course II enrollment usually experiences more attrition than Course I enrollment since many students who enroll to fulfill a requirement satisfy it in two years and drop out. Nevertheless, even in view of the downward trend in requirements, Course III enrollment in French, Spanish, and German in 1970 taken as a percentage of Course II enrollment rose approximately three percentage points over its 1968 level. In 1970 39.7% of Course II students elected Course III as opposed to 36.8% in 1968. The percentage of change from the 1968 figures was very nearly the same, 3.4% , for all three languages, but the actual percent of continuing students for each language varied somewhat. In French 46.2% of Course II students enrolled in Course III, in German 38.1%, and in Spanish 35.5%.

Looking at 1970 Course III enrollment from the standpoint of Course I, 18.9% of the initial 100 students who enrolled in Course I continued into Course III. The number varied slightly for each language, French 22.6%, German 20.0%, and Spanish 16.2%; but all three languages retained more students in 1970 than they had in 1968.

In comparing the attrition figures for the three languages in 1970, only three percentage points separated the French Course I attrition rate (51.1%) from the Spanish Course I rate (54.3%), but the gap widened to more than ten percentage points for Course II (53.8%; 64.5%). Even so this 64.5% attrition rate for Course II represents a decline of 3.7% percentage points from the 1968 figures when the rate was 67.9%. Course II attrition in Spanish in 1965 was 69.8%, in 1964 72.1%, and in 1961 76.8%. This amounts to a decline of 12 percentage points in Course II attrition in Spanish in the past nine years. In 1961 of one hundred students entering Course I, only 10.5% elected Course III. In 1970 this figure was 18.9%. In view of this and the fact that Spanish was the only language of the three to record an enrollment increase in 1970, its situation would appear to be the healthiest of all.

German has the lowest attrition rate of the three for Course I (47.4%) but suffered a very sharp rise for Course II. Its Course I attrition rate is 3.7% percentage points lower than the figure for French yet its Course II attrition rate climbed to 2.6 percentage points higher than the same figure for French. The problem may lie in the length of the sequence in German in most public secondary schools--typically only two years.

It would be prudent to bear in mind throughout this discussion of Course III enrollments that the length of the sequence for foreign languages is only two years or less in 44% of the public secondary schools (see Table 4A and 4B).[2] If the percentage of Course II students who continue into Course III is calculated on the basis of the estimated number of students who actually have open to them the option of enrolling in a third year course, then over 65% of the eligible Course II students elect Course III. It is unfortunate that we cannot determine more accurately which portion of the students we designate as dropouts are actually "pushed out," to use Dusel's term.[3] He refers to those students who complete their school's foreign language sequence a year or two before they graduate or who graduate before completing the sequence. They are not included, and rightly so, in the next course's enrollment figures, but by not being included, they count as dropouts when they should not actually figure at all.

Course IV enrollment for French, Spanish and German in 1970, seen as a percentage of Course III enrollment, increased somewhat although not significantly. French Course IV enrollment was up two percentage points to 37.8% of Course II enrollment. For the same course Spanish enrollments fell slightly to 31.1% of Course

III enrollment, and German fell 1.7% to 34.7% of Course III enrollment.

The number of students who survive into Course IV from Course I is 6.5 , up from 6.1 in 1968, of the beginning 100 students. The figures for each language are 8.5 for French, 5.1 for Spanish, and 6.9 for German.

II

Among those attrition studies which have contributed significantly to the research on the subject and have provided background for subsequent studies are those done by Paul Pimsleur, John Dusel, and Diana Bartley.[4] Pimsleur's work on underachievement in foreign languages done at Ohio State University in 1963 compared the performance of nearly three hundred students in five major subjects. The data led Pimsleur to conclude that foreign languages are more sequential and consequently require a higher degree of coordination between levels than do other subjects. He blamed the lack of coordination in many foreign language programs for the high number of dropouts. John Dusel of the California State Department of Education did not attempt to identify any one persistent condition resulting in foreign language attrition but rather created in 1969 a diagnostic tool to assist schools in dealing with their dropout problem. The tool consists of a list of common problems encountered by foreign language departments. The problems range from complaints about teachers taking too long to grade tests to grievances in the community about the particular dialect of the foreign language taught in the schools. Opposite the list of problems are suggestions designed to help to allievate these difficulties. Diana Bartley interpreted the results obtained by another instrument, the Foreign Language Attitude Scale, a Likert-type scale developed by Dr. Mary DuFort in 1962.[5] In a study in the Palo Alto Unified School District during the 1966-67 school year she tested the hypothesis that attitudes significantly affect performance. She proved that dropouts not only begin the school year with a poorer attitude toward foreign languages than do continuing students but also that their attitudes worsen considerably during the course of the year.

Although studies that concentrate on why students drop out of foreign languages do not always yield the same results, several reasons surface repeatedly as contributing to a student's decision to drop out. Recent studies point to five or six frequent causes of foreign language attrition. In a study of two hundred French III and Spanish III students in grades ten and eleven who decided not to enroll in Course IV, poor grades and feeling that no additional study would be required for college preparation were the two main reasons cited for dropping out.[6] According to about one third of the sample, scheduling difficulties caused them to drop out. Similarly, fifty percent of the students in a sample from Erie County, New York discontinued their foreign language study because the requirement was completed.[7] Others felt that the next level would be too hard. Some students were advised by their counselors to take a different subject because there language marks were not very good. A few preferred another subject or just were not interested in continuing.

Harry Reinert in Edmonds, Washington asked second year students their reasons for not continuing into the third year.[8] Over seventy percent of the students stated as their reason the fact that their requirements were completed. For some students poor grades deterred them (fifteen percent of sample) and a few found the class boring (eleven percent), but these reasons clearly had less impact than the completion of the requirement. Dislike of the teacher or dislike of the methods and materials had a negligible effect. Conversely, a majority of dropouts in a study in Utah in 1970 stated a dislike of the teacher's methods as the principal cause of their decision to drop out.[9] They also mentioned (in this order) low grades, a dislike of the language, and an interest in other classes as factors which influenced their decision.

During 1971 a graduate student at Brigham Young University prepared a questionnaire for foreign language dropouts as part of a larger survey of student attitudes.[10] He administered the questionnaire to students in thirty-seven junior and senior high schools in Utah. The students were to indicate the reasons from a list of sixty-five possibilities that contributed to their decision to drop out. The most frequently checked response was "I lost interest in the language." Two-thirds of all the students felt this accounted at least in part for their decision. Nearly as many students stated they preferred to study another subject instead of a language, this reason being essentially in the same vein as the first. Next they faulted the teaching method: "The language as it was taught was not relevant and worthwhile." The reason that followed may reflect poor grades or anxiety about the course difficulty: "I didn't have enough time to study the language as I should." A list of the twenty most frequently cited reasons appear in Table 5.

The State Department of Education in Virginia administered a very similar questionnaire again in a survey of student attitudes.[11] Although the reasons for dropping out varied slightly for each language, students from all groups indicated that the most significant reason was that they lost interest in the language. The fact that they completed the usual college entrance requirements or did not need anymore credit influenced the second largest group. Many students stated they were not learning enough to justify the time. Students in this survey, as in the Utah one, gave a prominent rank to the reason that the language as it was taught was not relevant and worthwhile. They also had qualms about whether their background would be sufficient for the next level. A list of their top twenty reasons for dropping out makes up Table 6.

A comparison of the lists in Table 5 and 6 for these two surveys shows that thirteen of the top twenty reasons appear in both lists although not in the same order. Even so the most significant reason is the same in both cases: loss of interest. Among the other stated reasons, completion of college entrance requirements and poor grades--or the anticipation of poor grades--figure prominently in nearly all the lists.

An overview of current attrition studies is useful to the extent that each study elicited truthful responses from the students about their reasons for dropping out. This limitation, together with the fact that we do not know what percentage of students classified as "dropouts" can be assumed actually to have dropped out, makes it difficult to arrive at clear-cut conclusions, forecasts, or prescriptions for the future. As language study becomes more and more a "free market" commodity, it becomes subject to the laws of supply and demand. And in any market, the vendor's survival depends both on the quality of his product and his ability to create and interpret the demand.

NOTES

[1] According to figures in the MLA's Foreign Language Offerings and Enrollments in Public and Non-Public Secondary Schools, Fall 1968, French, Spanish, and German represented ninty-eight percent of all public secondary school foreign language enrollments in 1968.

[2] G. Willbern and H. Rütimann, Lengths of Sequences in Modern Foreign Languages in U.S. High Schools, Modern Language Association, ED 040 986

[3] John P. Dusel, "Surveys and Reports on Foreign Language Enrollments," in Britannica Review of Foreign Language Education, Vol. 1, ed. Emma Marie Birkmaier (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1969), p. 426.

[4] Paul Pimsleur et al., Underachievement in Foreign Language Learning (Columbus: Ohio State University Research Foundation, 1963), ED 018 160: John P. Dusel, Diagnosing the Decrease in Foreign Language Enrollment, (Sacramento: California State Department of Education, 1969), ED 027 811; Diana Bartley "The Importance of the Attitude Factor in Language Dropout: A Preliminary Investigation of Group and Sex Differences," FLA, 3 (March 1970), 383-393.

[5] Bartley, p. 383. The Likert Scale, named for Rensis Likert of the University of Michigan, is a refinement of the "Yes/No/Maybe" choice of responses to a question. The Scale permits a respondent to indicate the degree of positive or negative feelings he has for a particular issue. For example, the Scale of responses might be (1) Not at all (2) A little bit (3) Quite a bit (4) Very Much.

[6] Allan A. Glatthorn and Pauline L. Edwards, Survey of French III and Spanish III Students not Planning to Study French IV or Spanish IV, (Albington, Pa.: Albington High School, 1967), ED 019 912.

[7] Anthony Papalia, "A Study of Attrition in Foreign Language Enrollments in Four Suburban Public Schools," FLA 4 (Oct. 1970). 62-67.

[8] Harry Reinert, "Student Attitudes Toward Foreign Language--No Sale!" MLJ, 54 (Feb. 1970), 107-112.

[9] Marilynne Lima, "A Comparative Study of Foreign Language Programs in Two Adjacent School Districts in the State of Utah and their effects on the Drop-out Rate," M.A. Thesis, Brigham Young University, 1973 (seen in MS).

[10] Lynn Wood, "A Study of Student Attitudes Towards Foreign Languges in Public Secondary Schools of Utah," MA Thesis, Brigham Young University 1972.

[11] Helen Warriner, "Student Attitudes Toward Foreign Language Study--Results of a Survey", Public Education in Virginia 8, No. 1 (1972), 4-7

Table 1

French, Spanish, and German Enrollments in Public Secondary Schools

in 1968 and 1970 for Courses I, II, III, IV

Language, Year (1)	Course I Enrollment (2)	Course II Enrollment (3)	Percent of Course I Enrollment who elect Course II (4)	Course III Enrollment (5)	Percent of Course II Enrollment who elect Course III (6)	Percent of Course I Enrollment who elect Course III (7)	Course IV Enrollment (8)	Percent of Course III Enrollment who elect Course IV (9)	Percent of Course I Enrollment who elect Course IV (10)
French 68	916,853	470,080	51.3	201,32[illegible]	42.8	22.0	72,077	35.8	7.9
French 70	854,482	417,669	48.9	192,953	46.2	22.6	72,972	37.8	8.5
Spanish 68	1,269,976	578,422	45.6	185,682	32.1	14.6	58,131	31.3	4.6
Spanish 70	1,292,640	591,471	45.8	209,960	35.5	16.2	65,314	31.1	5.1
German 68	260,907	139,334	53.4	49,770	35.7	19.1	18,106	36.4	6.9
German 70	252,700	132,813	52.6	50,545	38.1	20.0	17,519	34.7	6.9
TOTAL French Spanish German 1968	2,447,736	1,187,836	48.5	436,779	36.8	17.8	148,314	34.0	6.1
TOTAL French Spanish German 1970	2,399,822	1,141,953	47.6	453,458	39.7	18.9	155,805	34.4	6.5

Table 2-A

French Enrollment in Public Secondary Schools

in 1965, 1968, 1970

Region	French Enrollment Grades 7-12			Percent of Change in French		Percent of Change in PSS Enrollment	
	1965	1968	1970	1965-68	1968-70	1965-68	1968-70
New England	223,697	246,751	253,923	10.3	2.9	14.1	2.7
Mideast	478,384	546,144	513,830	14.2	-5.9	9.4	5.4
Great Lakes	279,632	274,982	250,306	-1.7	-9.0	4.8	3.8
Plains	67,013	81,941	70,154	22.3	-14.4	-7.9	16.8
Southeast	275,902	267,705	237,146	-3.0	-11.4	3.5	0.8
Southwest	48,155	53,102	48,218	10.3	-9.2	20.3	5.9
Rocky Mountains	35,459	33,176	31,878	-6.4	-3.9	10.4	6.4
Far West	178,610	182,021	157,143	1.9	-13.7	10.2	6.8
USA TOTALS	1,586,852	1,685,822	1,562,598	6.2	-7.3	7.0	4.9

Table 2-B

Spanish Enrollment in Public Secondary Schools

in 1965, 1968, 1970

Region	Spanish Enrollment Grades 7-12			Percent of Change in Spanish		Percent of Change in PSS Enrollment	
	1965	1968	1970	1965-68	1968-70	1965-68	1968-70
New England	68,917	88,768	121,218	28.8	36.6	14.1	2.7
Mideast	441,515	582,119	662,565	31.8	13.8	9.4	5.4
Great Lakes	319,498	332,272	339,879	4.0	2.3	4.8	3.8
Plains	98,676	121,061	120,307	22.7	-0.6	-7.9	16.8
Southeast	246,984	273,734	290,041	10.8	6.1	3.5	0.8
Southwest	221,219	220,199	227,008	-0.5	3.1	20.3	5.9
Rocky Mountains	54,433	47,880	54,800	-12.0	14.5	10.4	6.4
Far West	382,718	446,971	369,618	16.8	-17.3	10.2	6.8
USA TOTALS	1,833,960	2,113,004	2,185,436	15.2	3.4	7.0	4.9

Table 2-C

German Enrollment in Public Secondary Schools

in 1965, 1968, 1970

Region	German Enrollment Grades 7-12			Percent of Change in German		Percent of Change in PSS Enrollment	
	1965	1968	1970	1965-68	1968-70	1965-68	1968-70
New England	11,737	17,235	15,360	46.8	-10.9	14.1	2.7
Mideast	100,153	126,699	129,878	26.5	2.5	9.4	5.4
Great Lakes	98,298	112,658	104,357	14.6	-3.4	4.8	3.8
Plains	38,705	56,878	57,086	47.0	0.4	-7.9	16.8
Southeast	17,717	27,093	24,611	52.9	-9.2	3.5	0.8
Southwest	15,568	22,215	21,746	42.7	-2.1	20.3	5.9
Rocky Mountains	17,023	19,481	20,683	14.4	6.2	10.4	6.4
Far West	74,570	93,692	88,686	25.6	-5.3	10.2	6.8
USA TOTALS	373,771	475,951	462,407	27.3	-2.9	7.0	4.9

Table 3

Spanish Enrollment in Public Secondary Schools in

Course I and Courses II-VI in 1968 and 1970

Language, Year	Course I Enrollment	Percent of Change 1968-70	Course II, III, IV, V, VI Enrollment	Percent of Change 1968-70	Total Spanish Enrollment 1968-70	Percent of Change 1968-70
Spanish 1968	1,269,976	1.8	836,063	5.8	2,113,004	3.4
Spanish 1970	1,292,640		884,107		2,185,436	

Table 4-A*

Length of Foreign Language Sequence

in Public Secondary Schools

1970

Rank	Percent of PSS
1	4.4
2	39.7
3	20.9
4	26.1
5	7.7
6	1.2

Table 4-B*

Highest Level of Completion in Foreign Languages in

Public Secondary Schools

1970

Course Level	Percent of Students
1	27.7
2	49.0
3	14.7
4	7.3
5	1.1

* G. Willbern, H. Rütimann, Lengths of Sequences in Modern Foreign Languages in U.S. High Schools, Modern Language Association, 1970, ED 044 986.

Table 5

A Study of Student Attitudes Toward Foreign Languages
in Public Secondary Schools of Utah

Reasons for Discontinuing Foreign Language Study

1. I lost interest in studying the language.
2. I preferred to study another subject instead of a language.
3. The language as it was taught was not relevant and worthwhile.
4. I didn't have enough time to study the language as much as I should.
5. We weren't learning to understand the spoken language.
6. We tried to cover too much too fast.
7. I wasn't able to become fluent, which was my reason for studying the language.
8. I just didn't feel any more language was worthwhile.
9. I was lazy and didn't study enough.
10. All we did was memorize dialogs.
11. There was too much memorizing.
12. The repetition was boring.
13. I didn't like the teacher.
14. The teacher did most of the talking.
15. The teacher didn't pay sufficient attention to the problems of individuals.
16. The language became more difficult, and I couldn't keep up any longer.
17. We weren't learning to speak the language.
18. There wasn't enough emphasis on the people and their civilization.
19. I didn't like the textbook.
20. There wasn't enough emphasis on vocabulary and grammar.

TABLE 6

State Department of Education of Virginia

Most Significant Reasons Given by Students
For Dropping or Failing a Foreign Language Course

REASON [*numbers indicate rank of reason for each language group]	French N=307	Spanish N=295	German N=34
1. Lost interest in studying the language	1*	1*	1*
2. Had all the language needed for college credit	2	3	5
3. Not learning enough to justify the time	3	6	8
4. Language not relevant and worthwhile as taught	4	8	3
5. Had a poor background for the next level	5	19	11
6. Didn't need the credit	6	2	7
7. Weren't learning to speak the language	7	16	2
8. Didn't feel more language was worthwhile	8	5	9
9. Lacked motivation to study	9	9	13
10. Failed to keep up with increasing difficulty of language	10	13	12
11. Preferred to study another subject	11	10	16
12. Involved too much memorizing	12	4	4
13. Poor quality of instruction	13	18	
14. Weren't learning to understand the spoken language	14	15	16
15. Class covered too much too fast	15	7	20
16. Didn't like the teacher	16	17	14
17. Repetition was boring	17	11	6
18. Time required for study detrimental to grades in other subjects	18	14	
19. Intended to drop language study at this time	19	12	18
20. Insufficient study time	20	20	10
21. Involved too much translation			
22. Preferred to switch to language they might like better			
23. Preferred to switch to language which might be more beneficial			
24. Language was too difficult			